

# Sukkot Insights from Members of the RIETS Kollel Elyon

## The Tent in the Middle of Two Worlds

Rabbi Eli Belizon

Wexner Kollel Elyon Fellow, RIETS

Every time the Torah refers to the holidays of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, it groups them together. Although there is much similarity amongst the psukim which refer to these holidays, the Torah differentiates between them in a few subtle ways. The first of the discrepancies is found in Parshat Emor. Both Shavuot and Pesach are called a "*chag la'Hashem*" whereas Sukkos is coined as "*chag Hashem*." It sounds as if Sukkos is the holiday that Hashem celebrates whereas Pesach and Shavuot are holidays for Klal Yisrael to celebrate by sanctifying and focusing the holiday towards Hashem. Additionally, the Meshech Chachma points out that when discussing the holiday sacrifices of Shavuot and Pesach, the Torah states that they should be brought "*bamakom asher yivchar Hashem lishakein shmo sham*," in the chosen home of Hashem where his shechinah resides. However, with regards to Sukkot the passuk states *bamakom asher yivchar* and omits *leshaken shmo sham*. Does the Bais Hamikdash lose its unique status on the *regel* of Sukkot? What is the basis of the differentiation in the psukim between Sukkos and the other holidays?

To explain these discrepancies one needs to understand the essence of Sukkos. The Alshich understands that the laws, structure and dimensions of the Sukkah all symbolize lessons that show the way we must lead our lives. The sukkah must consist of two complete walls and a third which only needs to be the length of a tefach. These three walls form the shape of the letter heh, ה. The Alshich explains that this is based on the Gemara in menachot 29b which states<sup>75</sup> that this world was created with the letter heh. The Sukkah enables us to reflect on our perspective on this world. The Gemara writes that on sukkot we leave our *dirras kevvah*, our permanent dwelling, and enter into a *diraas aray*, a temporary dwelling. The Sukkah reminds us that this world is a temporary dwelling place and a pathway leading towards the ultimate

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<sup>75</sup> אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם, אל תקרי בהבראם אלא בה"י בראם, [הוי אומר: העולם הזה בה"י, והעולם הבא ביו"ד].

dwelling in the world to come. The walls, which symbolize *olam hazeh*, have no restrictions as to which materials they are permitted to be created from. This represents the fact that this world is a physical entity made up of various materials. The dwelling in the sukkah for seven days is tantamount to the seventy years of man's life in this world. On the eighth day, on Shemini Atzeres, Hashem requests from us to stay with him one more day. This alludes to the afterlife after the seventy years when we will merit to dwell in Hashem's presence.

The roof of the sukkah, the *schach*, symbolizes our connection in this world to the spiritual world above us. The schach cannot be created from something which is susceptible to impurity. A schach which carries impurity represents a life of sin which creates a barrier and separation between this world and the spiritual world. The halacha dictates that there should not be spaces of over three *tefachim* between pieces of schach. This hints to a sin which was transgressed three times. A transgression committed once or twice does not break the overall tent of merits which influences our lives. However, once a person commits the same transgression three times, he becomes accustomed to that transgression and it creates a leakage and break in the positive shade on our lives. The schach that influences our lives should not be *mechubar lekarka*, connected to the ground. This reminds us that we should not allow materialism and physicality to be the focal points of our lives. Additionally, the schach must be created from *gedulei karka*, a substance that grows from the ground. Such is our spiritual journey in this world, a journey which is laden with potential to grow. The height of the succah is limited to twenty amos. The Gemara explains that '*lo shalta bah ainah*,' one's eye can only see up to twenty amos and thus we must make sure that these messages are recognizable to man. On a deeper level, one should not wait and begin his spiritual journey at the age of twenty, once he is responsible and punishable for his actions, but rather one should begin his journey from an earlier stage as the succah is valid from a mere ten tefachim. Chazal dictate that the width of a Sukkah must provide sufficient space for a table. The shulchan, table, symbolizes wealth. Chazal wanted to ensure that everything, including our pursuit for livelihood and wealth, fit under the umbrella of spirituality.

This world creates a constant struggle between physicality and spirituality, between the body and the soul, the walls of the sukkah and the schach. The Avnei Nezer explains that this struggle takes place six days a week. Our body pulls us downward toward the physical and mundane parts of the world whereas the soul tries to pull upwards, towards *shamayim*; each side tries to influence the other. When Shabbos comes, this struggle ends peacefully and the body is influenced by the spiritual *neshama*. It is because of the sense of shalom between the body and soul that we sing "barchuni l'shalom," bless me for peace, on Friday night. The description of shalom is also used by the concept of sukkah. In tefilas Maariv we ask that G-d should spread upon us His peaceful sukkah, "ufros succat shlomecha." The sukkah generates a similar ability to create a state of shalom in this world by allowing the schach, the spirituality to influence the walls, the physicality.

The Ribono shel Olam searches for a resting place in this world. It is only when we internalize the message of the sukkah and create this state of shalom that He can reside in this world. It is based on this that we can now understand the difference between Sukkot and the other regalim. Sukkot is actually a "chag Hashem" because it is through the experiences of Sukkot

that Hashem finds an area in this world to dwell in. Based on this we can understand why Sukkot is the only holiday that the Torah does not specify that G-d rests his shechina "*bamokom asher yivchar leshaken shemo sham.*" It is during this unique chag that Hashem not only rests His presence in the makkom hamikdash but also in each one of our dwellings, our personal sukkahs. It is through understanding and internalizing these messages of the sukkah that we can achieve shalom in our sukkah and invite Hashem to reside with us.

## The Joy of Drawing Water

Rabbi David Hellman

Wexner Kollel Elyon Fellow, RIETS

The Rambam (Lulav 8:12) writes that in the days of the Beit HaMikdash, the joy and celebrations of Sukkot surpassed those of the other chagim. The highpoint of these celebrations was the simchat beit hasho'eiva, the grand celebration on the grounds of the Beit HaMikdash. The Mishnayot (Sukka, fifth perek) describe in detail the many golden menorahs that would light up the courtyards of all of Jerusalem, the instruments of the levi'im that were too numerous to count, and the singing, dancing, and juggling of the great sages and tzaddikim that the crowds watched in rapture. The Mishna unequivocally states that "someone who hasn't witnessed the simchat beit hasho'evia hasn't seen joy in his lifetime." Rashi (Sukka 51a) writes that this unique celebration surrounded the nisuch hamayim, the special water libation on the mizbeach that occurred at no other time of the year. In fact, the Gemara says that the source of the name "*simchat beit hasho'eiva*" is the pasuk "*ushe'avtem mayim b'sason,*" "and you will draw water with joy" (Yeshayahu 12:3).

While at first glance this name seems very appropriate, after giving it some more thought it is very strange indeed. The drawing of the water was merely a practical necessity, but was seemingly not part of the mitzvah at all. The event that everyone joyously anticipated was the pouring of the water on the mizbeach in this once a year mitzvah. Wouldn't it have made a lot more sense for the celebration to be called the "*simchat beit hanisuch*" or "*simchat beit hash'ficha*," "the celebration of the libation" or "the celebration of the pouring"? Why would chazal name the celebration after the drawing of the water?

Sukkot focuses on the simcha that should pervade the performance of our mitzvot and the Torah lives we lead. The name "*simchat beit hashoeiva*" teaches us a fundamental idea regarding this simcha. True joy in serving Hashem is not found in the results or the outcomes. Our spiritual satisfaction should not be dependant or commensurate with simply the total number of dapim we learn, or perakim of tehillim we recite, or acts of kindness we perform. Rather, the profound simcha of avodat Hashem stems from the time and effort we pour into our commitment to the Torah and its mitzvot. It is the process of preparation and anticipation that makes the fulfillment of a mitzvah a moment of happiness. Studying the laws and ideas of the mitzvah beforehand, taking the time and mental energy to ensure the mitzvah will be without blemish, and spending extra money to perform the mitzvah in a more beautiful manner all add to the preciousness and simcha of a mitzvah.

In other words, a person cannot expect to find fulfillment or joy by doing nothing more than the required performance of the mitzvah, “the pouring of the water;” rather, a person will find a wellspring of happiness and inspiration in the time and effort he commits to the preparation and anticipation of the mitzvah, “the drawing of the water.” Chazal chose the name *simchat beit hasho’eiva* to teach us this most critical lesson: it is the drawing of the water, not the pouring, that is the true source of our *simcha*. May we all merit to achieve the level of “*ivdu et Hashem b’simcha*,” serving Hashem in joy on this Sukkot and beyond.

## **Sitting in the Succah on Shmini Atzeres**

**Rabbi Rafi Rosenblum**

Wexner Kollel Elyon Fellow, RIETS

The Gemara (Succah 47a) clearly states that on Shmini Atzeres in *chutz l’aretz* one should sit in the succah, but not make a *bracha*. While the Rishonim deal with this strange dichotomy,<sup>76</sup> it doesn’t appear that there is any discussion about the obligation to sit in the succah. This makes the custom of many not to sit in the succah all the more intriguing. In the subsequent paragraphs, I hope to bring a number of reasons that will hopefully explain the basis for this somewhat prevalent yet perplexing *minhag*.<sup>77</sup>

Tosfos in Succah (*ibid.* s.v. *Misav*) ask the following question. Why is it that we sit in the succah on Shmini Atzeres, because of *sfeka d’yoma*, but we don’t take the *lulav* and *esrog* for the same reason? They answer that since the *daled minim* are *muktzah* on Shabbos and Yom Tov, the only reason that we can take them on Yom Tov is because we are obligated in the mitzvah of taking them. If we would take them on Shmini Atzeres, it would be obvious that we are doing so due to the *safek*, and it would look like a violation of *baal tosef*, the prohibition of adding on to a mitzvah. However, when it comes to the succah, there are many times that we enjoy sitting outside on the porch. Therefore, it isn’t obvious why we are sitting there, and we are therefore obligated to do so because of the *safeka d’yoma*. The Tosfos Rabbenu Peretz writes that there was a custom for people to eat in the succah only during the day on Shmini Atzeres, but not at night. The reason for this may be because at night it is very cold and it is obvious to all why they are sitting in the succah, whereas during the day it could just be that they enjoy eating outdoors. This is echoed by the *Korban Nisanel* (4:7), who writes that if it is a cold or windy day, one should refrain from eating in the succah on Shmini Atzeres. It is for this reason that R’ Yaakov Kamanetsky rules in the *Emes L’Yaakov* on *Shulchan Aruch*, that if someone forgot to leave a light on in the succah on Shmini Atzeres which falls out on

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<sup>76</sup> See the explanation of the Ritva and the Ran in Succah *ibid.* in the opinion of the Rif. Also, see the Mordechai (772), the Meiri, and the Rambam (*Teshuvos P’eir Hador siman 26*) where these Rishonim offer different answers to the question.

<sup>77</sup> Note: this article is not meant to condone the practice of eating outside of the succah on Shmini Atzeres. Rather, the purpose is to gain an understanding to why the *minhag* exists, and what it is based on.

Shabbos,<sup>78</sup> he should eat his meal in the house, because otherwise it would be obvious that he is eating outside to fulfill his obligation.

Another line of reasoning not to require eating in the succah on Shmini Atzeres comes from the reading of the Gemara that the obligation is based on. The Yichusai Hatanaim V'Amoraim says that there are those who say to follow the second opinion of the Gemara like we do in most instances in Shas. The second opinion states that there is a machlokes if you should sit in the succah on Shmini Atzeres, and we paskin that you don't need to sit in the succah. These people hold like the second opinion in the Gemara, even though the Gemara clearly writes that the halacha is that you should sit in the succah and not make a bracha, because they understand that line to have been added by the Baal Halachos Gedolos, and they disagree with it. Another defense of this practice which is based on the reading of the Gemara is found in the S'fas Emes. He writes that when the Gemara writes that one should sit in the succah on Shmini Atzeres, it doesn't mean that he has to eat in the succah, rather, he is allowed to sit there. Since there is no obligation to sit in the succah, the Gemara says that you sit there, but don't make a bracha. Accordingly, someone who doesn't want to sit in the succah, doesn't need to.

The minhag of eating inside for both meals is but one of the minhagim that we have nowadays. There are those who eat inside only at night, and those who eat in the succah only at night. The important thing for us to remember is that like the minhag of eating inside for both meals, these minhagim are based on credible sources in the Rishonim and Achronim.<sup>79</sup> By recalling this, it will be easier for us to accept and relate to people whose minhagim are different than ours.

## **Sukkot – Can We Really Handle Another Holiday?**

Rabbi Yehuda Turetsky

Beren Kollel Elyon Fellow, RIETS

Sukkot's place in the Jewish calendar raises a basic question, one many explicitly articulate and others intuitively feel. Is there really a need for another holiday after Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? After ten days dedicated to repentance and growth, a grueling time period where we strive for greater spiritual heights, is it really necessary to have another holiday so close to the days of awe?

The question is even stronger according to the Tur. He writes (O.C. 625) that a more natural time to observe Sukkot is the spring, the time when we initially left Egypt. The only reason why Sukkot is observed in the fall is to show that our true intention for sitting in the Sukkah is to fulfill God's command and not because it provides us with shade on a hot day. For him, there appears to be no reason why Sukkot needs to be kept specifically when it is; any time

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<sup>78</sup> Presumably in a manner that he would be required to eat in the succah during Succos, because if he wouldn't need to eat there on Succos, like the Rama (siman 640 seif 4) paskins, then of course he wouldn't need to eat there on Shmini Atzeres.

<sup>79</sup> See the Tur (siman 668) and the Bais Yosef and Bach (ibid.) who discuss the minhag of eating in the succah for the day and not the night. See the Taz (siman 668) where he talks about sitting in the succah only at night.

outside the summer months would be appropriate. If so, why keep Sukkot now? Is there a lesson we can learn from its peculiar placement in the Jewish calendar?<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, there are so many beautiful themes and ideas related to Sukkot. It is a time when we recall God's love for us, and it is when we contemplate our relationship with nature. Would not a longer break enable us to better prepare for and gain from Sukkot? The Talmud even implies that one should begin preparing for an upcoming holiday thirty days before it begins.<sup>81</sup> But how is that possible when the sheer physical exhaustion of these three weeks is so great, the spiritual toll so demanding, that adequate preparation seems unfeasible? Indeed, Rama (O.C.624:5, 625:1) even instructs us to begin building our Sukkah on the very night Yom Kippur ends. Is that really necessary, and what do we gain from it?

A variety of answers have been offered to this general question, many of which highlight the special and complimentary connection between Sukkot and the days of awe.<sup>82</sup> It seems possible, though, to suggest an additional perspective. Maybe one idea derived from Sukkot's placement in the Jewish calendar, even if it is not the primary motivating factor, is what all of these holidays teach us about ourselves.

The three weeks from Rosh HaShana through Sukkot are not, nor are they intended to be, easy. They test us physically, teach us what we can achieve, and inspire us to new heights. We learn how much we are capable of doing. We see that we are able to set aside time despite our busy schedule, and push ourselves in the face of fatigue. We realize how committed we are to the Jewish tradition and how much we are willing and able to sacrifice – physically and emotionally – for its ideals.

We do not, though, only learn about the limits of our physical strength; we also learn about our spiritual stamina.<sup>83</sup> We gain insight into our ability to balance the seriousness and at times fear of the days of awe with the happiness and joy of Sukkot. We balance different emotions and different ways of connecting with God, and in the process we cultivate a more complete religious personality. Despite the feelings of exhaustion, the Torah wants us to continue to push ourselves, to gain from each holiday without it coming at the expense of the other, and to better understand what it means to be a complete Jew.

In truth, Sukkot's placement on the Jewish calendar may seem a bit out of place. It is, though, through observing Sukkot immediately after the days of awe that we gain so much. We learn about our ability to push ourselves for that which we value, to invest physically and thereby benefit spiritually. As a result of the Jewish calendar, we begin to build the ideal religious personality, with the desire to invest all of one's strengths for God. Through juxtaposing

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<sup>80</sup> There are those that question Tur's logic and assume that Sukkot needed to be celebrated when it is. See Vilna Gaon, commentary to Shir haShirim (1:4). Accordingly, Sukkot needed to be observed directly after Yom Kippur, regardless of the difficulty involved.

<sup>81</sup> See Talmud Pesachim (6a) and Beit Yosef (O.C. 429) for a discussion of the precise impact and scope of this law.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Aruch HaShulchan (O.C. 625:5).

<sup>83</sup> See the article by Rav Michael Rosensweig on torahweb.org about the relationship between Yom Kippur and Sukkot for a similar idea.

Sukkot to the days of awe, the Torah teaches us to connect to our creator through love and fear, through fasting and feasting.

At the end of these three weeks, we may feel tired and exhausted, but we leave inspired and exalted. We now know what we are capable of and how great we are. אשריך ישראל ואשרי חלקיך, praiseworthy are you Israel and praiseworthy is your portion.